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Title: The Politics of Nonsense: Sense from the Margins

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Synopsis

The proposed dissertation will seek to extend the scope of nonsense as a generic construct to incorporate colonial and post-colonial Bangla literary writings which have not often been classified as nonsense. The particular relationship of language and meaning in nonsense, I would argue, has often been consciously used as a tool by those whose points of view differ from that of the centre of power at that given point in history. In the process, nonsense acquires a very significant place in the politics of the centre and margin.

Trying to trace Indian literary traditions similar to the English/European tradition(s??) of nonsense (for that matter any other such comparison between the two cultures) can be a tricky task, and may lead to two extreme positions – being too open may lead to a tendency superficial cross-cultural analogizing, on the other hand being too conservative, it may lead to a overlooking some traditions which may apply similar semantic, linguistic and narrative strategies. Most scholars who have written on the possibilities of an indigenous tradition of nonsense, have pointed to the obvious fact that the Indian Aesthetic conventions of Rasa, does not have within its ambit an equivalent of nonsense. Sukumar Ray, one of the most significant practitioners of nonsense literature in Bangla, had touched upon the absence of nonsense in the scheme of the rasa or the nine Rasas. (Ray, preface to *Abol Tabol*). He coined the term 'Kheyal Rasa' to describe his work. Michael Heyman in his introduction to the The *Tenth Rasa: An Anthology of Indian Nonsense,* suggests that there is twofold significance in Ray 'inventing' the tenth rasa: (a) it helps distinguish nonsense from any other form of literature (P. Xli) a distinction which Tagore, also recognized while writing about *chhoda* or nursery rhymes in the essay 'Loksahitya' (orig. pub 1893) by suggesting a Baalrasa or Children's rasa. (b) Heyman also believes that 'more significantly, through the creation of the rasa of *whimsy* revises about 1800 years of fundamental aesthetic theory …' and goes onto say that by distinguishing itself from *hasyarasa*, it destabilizes the combined happy/comic by suggesting a *rasa* which is problematically humorous. Though this theorization is very interesting it does not account for an Indian theory of nonsense or the practice of nonsense in pre-British India. Therefore, to locate an indigenous literary tradition akin to nonsense we must turn our attention to the margin. I would like to posit 'Sandhya Bhasa' as the closest equivalent to the modern nonsense. Sandhya Bhaasa emerges as a kind of alternative semantic space. I would argue that alternative religio-metaphysical cults in India have been using 'Sandhya Bhasa' as a kind of exclusive language. The oldest extant manuscript in the Old Bangla (a language which is also thought to be the precursor of modern Oriya, Bangla, Maithili, Assamese and other languages)is the Buddhist Collection of *Sahajiya Pada*scalled the *Charyacharyabinaschaya* (C.10th century AD -12th C. AD). Not all poems of the Charayapadas use nonsensical language (it is also noteworthy that neither do all passages of Carroll, Lear or Ray).

However, these poems can be seen as using nonsense of particular sort, it is nonsense to anyone who is not initiated in to the cult, and perfect sense to ones who are trained in the tradition. (Bhusuku, Verse 33, Dhendhonpad). Mircea Eliade in his book 1967 *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* has discussed in depth the various interpretations of the etymology of sandhya bhasa and shows how it was mistranslated as twilight language. The "intent'' of using such language is twofold: (a) it helps conceal the ways of the cult by using alternative semiotics. (b) It also draws attention to 'deeper' metaphysical reality beyond the scope of the everyday world/logic.

Another remarkable example of such inverted language from a much later alternative religio-metaphysical cult is Lalon Fakir's song "chander gaye chand legechhe".Thus by using such language the exclusivity and the secrecy of the cult is preserved, saving it from both infiltration and persecution at the same time. The works of Dhendhonpada and Lalon and many other across Indian languages, show how nonsense was used in double edged way in certain examples of Sandhya Bhasa. These works use phrases which make grammatical sense but semantically are nonsensical, to those outside the cult (this apart from other things also stresses on the phenomenological nature of nonsense).Much like the code languages devised during the WWII, 'Sandhya Bhasa' uses a specific alternative semiotic code.This tradition is an indication there may have been an indigenous tradition of using nonsense within the larger Indian literary tradition.

After Sandhya Bhasa, Bangla nonsense lived in oral folk traditions. Bengali folk rhymes have been divided into three categories (i)Ghumparani Chhora or Lullaby(ii)Chele Bhulano Chhora or Nursery Rhymes, and(iii)Meyeli Chhora or feminine Rhymes. Like many other cultures, folk rhymes used nonsense devices in Bangla literature also. However nonsense nursery rhymes are not generally considered as subversive as either sandhya bhasa or the more famous 20th century nonsense, both of which use nonsense as double as a tool for mocking the centre from the margin. However, the oral folk tradition is, in itself situated at the margin, and therefore most likely at odds with the centre. Even more significantly, the 20th century practitioners of nonsense in Bangla, engaged with the folk rhyme tradition is a very deep way. In 1886 Rabindranath Tagore, Rabindranath published 'Lokosahitya' as two essays on the folk rhymes of Bengal, which worked both as an analysis as well as collection of these rhymes. Tagore also made the newly formed *Bangiyo Sahitya Parishad* to serialize these rhymes in their journal. Jogindranath Sarkar's *Khukumonir Chhora* (1899) was another land mark in the field. Sukumar Ray's father Upendrakishore also did serious research on children's rhymes. One may argue that this interest in the Bengali oral folk tradition combined with the exposure to the European Masters of nonsense paved the way for the blossoming of Bangla Nonsense in 20th century.

In early twentieth century Bengal, nonsense became a tool of obliquely engaging with some of the disturbing realities of existence as a colonial subject. Thus nonsense remains the language of the margins in the twentieth century.The most brilliant exponent of Bangla nonsense was, of course, Sukumar Ray (1887-1923). The Bangla nonsense of Ray, can be seen as a colonial genre appropriated from/and used to ridiculing the colonial masters. Fresh out of college, Sukumar founded with his friends the "Nonsense Club" and produced for the club works such as *Jhalapala* and *Lokhkhoner Shoktishel* both of which are interestingly plays and both pose a challenge to hierarchical orders in their own way. *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* is his best known example of prose nonsense; it is similar in structure to *Alice in Wonderland*, however, its language games

and humour is very much Bengali in flavour. It is also a critique of conventions through nonsense and is also a chilling depiction of oppression. *Aboltabol and Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La* are full of neologisms and portmanteau words, and *Ha-Ja-Ba-Ra-La like* prose nonsense works of Carroll,are full of nonsense verses, embedded throughout. Thus Ray is able skillfully combine the Bengali chhora tradition, with the European nonsense form.

Rabindranath Tagore, a great admirer of Sukumar Ray's nonsense, himself drifted towards nonsense in the very last decade of his life with the publication of *Khapchara,* of which not all poems are pure nonsense, and the prose nonsense masterpiece *Shey*. What makes *Shey* stand out is that it not only ridicules authority, society and conventions of narrative, but also the author himself. On one level, 'Shey' is a dialogue between the author: Dadamoshai, the text: Shey and the reader: Pupu. Shey the text has life of its own, free from authorial chains, therefore alluding to the nature of language itself. Shey contains some brilliantly written purely nonsensical passages. Shey is also the blossoming of a different Rabindranath, who ridicules himself and 'brand Rabindranath' in the passage in which dadamoshai talks about himself. This is the 'whimsical' Rabindranath looking at the dominant construct of Rabindranath the philosopher poet: 'That was just the beginning. The much in demand national poet uses nonsense as a mode of self-criticism.

It may be argued, therefore, that use of nonsense as linguistic tool is to express what may be termed 'self-imposed marginality'. Here the marginality is partly a choice, in order to be able retain as a certain autonomy from the influence of the centre. Therefore the distance from centre is conscious strategy. The use of nonsense either as a device in Sandhya Bhasha or as genre in the 20th century used as tools for subversion, while Sandhya Bhasa helped protect alternative cults to protect themselves, both from persecution and infiltration, the nonsense as a genre in the 20th century created an avenue for covert yet direct criticism of the contemporary colonial space. Thus it may be argued that 20th century Bangla nonsense,apart from being a derivative of the English nonsense of the 19th century ,is also as much part of an Indian tradition, which distances itself from the centre through the use of language.

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